# Traditionally, I am Entitled to a Last Meal[1]

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**Abstract:** Nunberg maintains that there are cases like "I am traditionally entitled to a last meal", as uttered by a condemned prisoner facing the firing squad, which suggest that an indexical like 'I' does double duty as a vehicle of singular and general reference. I argue against this claim. My position is that the sentence should be factored out into two: "Traditionally, a condemned prisoner is entitled to a last meal" and "I am a condemned prisoner". Nunberg's sentence is generated by means of an illicit substitution of 'I' for 'a condemned prisoner' inside the scope of 'traditionally'. The morale is that sloppy or literally nonsensical speech like Nunberg's sentence is not suitable as data for logical analysis of natural language. What is suitable data is the two-premise argument I put forward.

**Keywords:** Nunberg, condemned prisoner, indexicals, logical analysis of natural language.

How are we to select the linguistic input data for logical analysis of natural language? To suggest an answer, let me start out with a brief preamble on the methodology of the enterprise of logical analysis of natural language, as I understand it.

*Natural* language, as it is actually spoken and written, is riddled with sloppiness and nonsense of various degrees that we more often than

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not seem to be able to make good sense of in our day-to-day linguistic exchanges with one another. The primary reason is probably because linguistic transactions come embedded in practical situations in which we, as speakers and hearers, producers and consumers of language, can have recourse to extra-semantic factors like each other's motives, intentions, common knowledge, shared beliefs, intonation, winks, nods, nudges, and whatever else, much of which is likely to elude full conceptualization. Being able to partake successfully in such transactions is a cornerstone of human life and an all-important prerequisite for a human to be considered a fully functional human being and a full-fledged member of a given culture, including its speech community. You need to get the point, and get it quickly, to count as a member of a speech community, even when what you are required to process as input data is, strictly speaking, nonsensical. In this regard, pragmatics, rather than syntax or semantics, is by far the most important of the three parts of semiotics, when it comes to *natural* language.

However, exactly because *natural* language is so intimately interwoven with extra-linguistic practices, fragments of *natural* language cannot, in their raw state, be fed into a framework or system of logical or formal or strictly semantic analysis. Such a framework accepts as input data only cleaned-up, clean-shaven, sanitized pieces of language. This much ought to be uncontroversial (but most likely is not).

The reason I am bringing this up is because there is a cluster of one-liners and miniature dialogues, due to Nunberg (1993), that various philosophers of language have attempted to analyze as though these sentences were already primed for semantic analysis. They are not, in my view. They are too close to being raw data imported from actual natural language for them to be amenable to semantic analysis. They are, in my view, typical examples of sentences that, though being strictly speaking nonsensical, still make pretty good sense to us. At least they make good enough sense, when embedded in a practical situation, to qualify as coherent speech, in that what the speaker intends to convey does seem to be receiving loud and clear. However, once we set out to assign a semantics to the various parts of the respective sentences and the entire sentences themselves, our semantic analysis runs the risk of aborting. For no sense, in the formal semanticist's sense, can be assigned to nonsense. Therefore, when attempting to carry out a semantic analysis, I recommend first making it unambiguous and explicit what the intended message is and only then feeding the resulting sanitized,

quasi-natural linguistic fragment into the machine of semantic analysis. This approach to natural-language analysis has as a consequence that when we say we are analyzing natural language, what we are really saying is that we are analyzing logically idealized fragments of natural language, as though actual speakers had already primed their speech for logical analysis. The main reason formal semanticists are interested in natural language is not because it is natural (as opposed to the artificial languages of mathematics, logic, and the empirical sciences), but because it is unique in containing words and contexts that are not found in other kinds of language, not least words bearing on attitudinal and temporal modalities.

A prominent example of raw data I have in mind stems from Nunberg (adapted from *ibid*., pp. 20ff). Somebody is a condemned prisoner, already facing the firing squad, but then utters the following just before the final curtain:

> "Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal."

We know what he means – which is not necessarily to know what the sentence means. The prisoner wants to be served a last meal, and to beef up his plea he invokes the tradition that someone who is a condemned prisoner is entitled to a last meal. But the sentence as it stands is nonsense, in the light sense of nonsense that its truth-condition cannot possibly be satisfied – unless, of course, the prisoner in question has a track record as a condemned prisoner who was so far always executed and was on most occasions served a last meal.

The sentence "Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal" is one that we, as formal semanticists active in the enterprise of logical analysis of natural language, should not attempt to analyze as is. What we should attempt to analyze is, in the first instance, how it got generated at all. This will give us a clue as to what should actually be analyzed.

I suggest the sentence is the result of rolling two sentences into one. The first sentence would be,

> "Traditionally, if somebody is a condemned prisoner then they are entitled to a last meal."

The second sentence would be,

> "I am a condemned prisoner."

Since the speaker knows the antecedent of the general sentence to apply to him, and knows that his audience knows this, he lops off the antecedent and feels free to substitute 'I' for the anaphoric pronoun 'they' in the consequent that reaches back to 'somebody'. This would have been appropriate, had it not been for the fact that the maneuvers take place inside the scope of the modifier denoted by 'Traditionally'. Without the modifier, the maneuvers would have been these:

> For all $x$, if $x$ is a condemned prisoner then $x$ is entitled to a last meal;
> I am a condemned prisoner;
> Therefore, I am entitled to a last meal.

In first-order predicate logic (pretending that the constant '$a$' can represent an indexical such as 'I'):

$$\forall x\ (Ax \supset Bx)$$
$$Aa$$
$$\therefore\ Ba$$

I suppose this little inference is the logical backbone of what enables the competent hearer to make sense of what the prisoner intends to say. But if the adverbial modification introduced by *traditionally* is appended to the first premise, thus expressing an exception-tolerant generalization over past events, the substitution of '$a$' for '$x$' is invalid, and so neither "Traditionally, $Ba$" nor "$Ba$" follows from the premises. Since 'Traditionally' is also appended to the conclusion to generate "Traditionally, $Ba$", the resulting argument turns out to be structurally identical to the well-known modal fallacy of necessitating the consequent:

$$\Box\,(\forall x\ (Ax \supset Bx))$$
$$Aa$$
$$\therefore\ \Box\, Ba$$

The first premise is *de dicto*, the second *de re*, and so is the conclusion. The qualification of the relation between being an $A$ and being a $B$ as traditionally and necessarily obtaining, respectively, does not, of course, carry over to an individual $a$ who is an $A$ and qualify $a$ as being traditionally or necessarily a $B$.

If my take on Nunberg's sentence has something going for it, I have shown how, on a logical reconstruction, a speaker takes two sentences,

"Traditionally, if somebody is a condemned prisoner then they are entitled to a last meal" and "I am a condemned prisoner", and rolls them into one, "Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal", which is the one he utters. A hearer succeeding in making sense of this last sentence is, on a logical reconstruction, someone who disentangles the speaker's sentence into "Traditionally, if somebody is a condemned prisoner then they are entitled to a last meal" and "He [the speaker] is a condemned prisoner" and who realizes that the speaker has applied, wrongfully, the rule of universal instantiation inside the scope of *traditionally*. So the competent hearer is someone who both knows what the speaker intends to say and also knows that they are not saying it quite right.

This line of analysis, consisting in factoring one sentence out into two and spotting an illegitimate substitution of an indexical for a variable, provides a template that can be applied to other of Nunberg's examples. For instance, the sentence (adapted from Kijania-Placek's (2010) adaption of Nunberg's entry (59) in (*ibid.*, p. 29))

> "Tonight is always the greatest party of the year"

might well be run-of-the-mill in a universe where time was cyclical, whereas in our linear universe it sticks out like a sore thumb. Again there is an illegitimate substitution inside the scope of a temporal modifier, this time *always*. So how was "Always, tonight is the greatest party of the year" generated? ('Always' was placed at the head to indicate its intended scope.) We need a short background story to place 'tonight' in context. So assume that the sentence "Always, ...tonight..." was uttered on, say, April 1st, 2011, during lunch at the main office of the Slovak Spelunking Society. Then the first sentence being factored out would be,

> "Always, if a day $y$ is April 1st then the greatest party of the year is on $y$ in the evening."

The second sentence would be,

> "Today is April 1st, 2011."

These two sentences then get telescoped into,

> "Always, today is the greatest party of the year in the evening."

Nunberg's "Tonight is always the greatest party of the year" is simply a much more natural-sounding rephrasing of that last sentence.

The Nunberg cases arguably extend beyond Nunberg. I would suggest, for instance, that a sentence such as,

"If I were you I would enjoy my last meal"

can be analyzed using the same template as above, in that two sentences have been rolled into one (though here we need not worry about substitution inside the scope of a modifier). What is tricky about this last sentence is, of course, its counterfactual antecedent, which, if taken literally, expresses a necessarily false proposition (given minimal assumptions about the identity of individuals), and which, if not taken literally, requires a fair amount of hermeneutic charity to make sense of. Moreover, there is the well-known logical problem that since the antecedent is true at no logically possible world, there is no world 'close to' the actual world at which it would be true. A standard move is to invoke logically impossible worlds at which the antecedent proposition is true in order to lubricate the standard, possible-world based Stalnaker-Lewis interpretation of counterfactuals. But apart from general qualms about importing impossible worlds into the ontology of one's semantic and logical theory, they seem out of place here, anyway, since natural language is about what is contingently true or contingently false (or contingently without a truth-value) and not what is necessarily true or necessarily false (or necessarily without a truth-value). In short, invoking impossible worlds in one's analysis of "If I were you I would enjoy my last meal" would suggest, to me at least, that one's analysis had gotten off on the wrong foot. (Just to be clear, Nunberg is not invoking impossible worlds.)

Yet, despite the semantic and logical awkwardness of "If I were you", we routinely do utter and understand sentences beginning with "If I were you". The two sentences in question that "If I were you I would enjoy my last meal" is to be factored out into are, in my view, the following:

"If I were in situation *X* then I would do *Y*"

and

"You are in situation *X*".

By running these two sentences into one, we end up with, "If I were in your situation then I would do *Y*", which is a perfectly sensible and reasonable English sentence that does not require us to attempt to make sense of or logically interpret a necessary falsehood. "If I were you", on this analysis, serves as a shorter and perhaps more dramatic way of saying, "If I were in your situation".

An important general point is that nothing I have urged for concerning any of these cases trades on any erratic behaviour of indexicals such as 'I', 'you', 'tonight', contrary to what Nunberg (1993) and Kijania-Placek (2010) maintain. Maybe there is a need to allow for so-called descriptive use of indexicals, as Nunberg recommends in the light of the following diagnosis:

> In context, the adverbs *usually* and *always* must be understood as involving quantification over instances, but these readings are not possible if the subjects of the sentences are interpreted as referring to individuals or particular times. So it is hard to see what coherent 'literal' interpretations we could assign to such utterances [as the execution and party ones]. (*Ibid*., p. 32)

And maybe there is no need to add descriptive use of indexicals. Perhaps such an addition would just be an artifact of a flawed semantic analysis of cases where there appears to be a tension between the singularity of 'I' and 'today' and the generality of 'traditionally' and 'always'. And perhaps not. Though I would tend to think so, if for no other reason than that a purported analysandum such as "Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal" is, strictly speaking, nonsensical on a literal reading. Nunberg is right to suggest that the key to laying bare the intended sense behind uttering a sentence such as this consists in accounting for the duality of singularity and generality. Only his duality revolves around 'I' picking out both a particular individual (the speaker) and whatever individual has the property of being a condemned prisoner, while my duality concerns two sentences (in one of which 'I' occurs and then only as a means of picking out the speaker). This is not to say that 'I' (or its counterparts in other languages) cannot, on other occasions, be deployed as a vehicle of general reference. It can; for instance, when the speaker pretends to be taking himself or herself as being representative of a group of people with shared interests or features, perhaps in the fashion of voicing the inner monologue of each member of the group. (For discussion, see Zobel 2010.)

If we factor out "Traditionally, *P*" into two sentences, one singular, the other general, it will not even begin to seem as though, at least on some occasions, indexicals would have the semantics (as opposed to pragmatics) of vehicles of general reference. Hence the view I am advocating is at variance with the one advocated by Kijania-Placek, since in my view literal and standard use of indexicals does not have the option of expressing general propositions:

> [I]ndexicals can be used to express either singular or general propositions depending on whether they are used demonstratively or descriptively. (*Ibid*., p. 140)

What I just said about "Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal" being literally nonsensical is certainly not intended to imply that a semantic theory, i.e. a theory of linguistic sense, should not also account for linguistic nonsense. It should; in general, a theory must account not only for the success cases but also for the fail cases. But, first, it is a methodological constraint that one's semantic theory as applied to sense should carry over seamlessly to nonsense, with no semantic theory earmarked especially for nonsense; and secondly, instances of nonsense do not get analyzed as though they were literally sensible.

The morale, I suggest, is that sloppy and nonsensical speech, jazzy as it may be, is not what gets logically analyzed: crisp speech is. And crisp speech, in the case of logical analysis of natural language, is a cleaned-up surrogate of sloppy or nonsensical, but *natural*, speech. The enterprise of logical analysis of natural language is feasible only because what gets logically analyzed is quasi-natural language. If you know what I mean.

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